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**NARRATIVE UNRELIABILITY  
AS A LITERARY DEVICE AND RECEPTION SHIFT**

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**Abstract.** The primary aim of the article is to gain a better understanding of narrative unreliability as a literary device in reception perspective. While previous studies have focused mainly on textual incongruities, argued for an encoded strategy on the part of the implied author or have embraced a reader-oriented model; the present study attempts to analyze the concept of unreliable narration as a convergence of both the rhetorical and cognitive/constructivist models in genre identification. The object of the analyses is Sarah Waters' novel "The Little Stranger", in particular its metamorphosed genre with the elements of historical sketch, mystery, poltergeist/ ghost story, mysticism and detective intrigue. The author's narrative strategy is specified by the multiple readers' responses. Despite the explicit Gothic modality, the historical context makes it possible to implement the author's conceptual intentions. Sarah Waters chooses a subjective narration type, when the homodiegetic narrator performs a dual function: both the narrator-observer and the character. In his unreliable narratives, the complementarities of misreporting, misinterpreting, underreporting and misevaluating are traced. Narrative unreliability in the novel serves as a kind of disguise for the mental aberrations of the homodiegetic narrator, so that the peculiarities of his narration cause doubts about his adequacy, freeing the reader from his influence and making it possible to create various interpretations of the story. Consequently, narrative unreliability

here directly affects both the genre identification and the range of reception shift from the implicit reader to the text (implicit communication), and from interpretive frames to the implicit author and reverse, that allows to apply a convergence of rhetorical and cognitive/constructivist methods in the novel analyses.

**Key words:** Sarah Waters, narrative unreliability, homodiegetic narrator, discordance, reception, metamorphosed genre.

The transformation of genre forms in modern literature stimulated the emergence of up-to-date literary studies; their subject is the genesis of metamorphosed genres and the application of appropriate narrative strategies, embracing narrative unreliability as a literary device. This problem has attracted attention of foreign and Ukrainian scholars (W. Booth, S. Chatman, J. Phelan, T. Yacobi, A. Nünning, M. Fludernik, O. Chervinska, I. Bekhta, I. Papusha and others). However, the use of narratologic approaches to the genreological analysis of fiction is the branch of literary analysis that currently is not sufficiently developed. In particular, this relates to the concept of narrative unreliability, due to which the author stratifies narrative modalities in the text of fiction and provokes readers to doubt concerning interpretation of events in the result of the perception of the narrator as unreliable one, which directly affects the identification of the fiction genre.

Relevance of the study is specified by the need for an extension of the genreological analysis of narrative aspects in the novel by Sarah Waters. The purpose of the article is to investigate the concept of the unreliability in the novel by S. Waters “The Little Stranger” in the aspect of the reception theory.

The novels by almost unknown to the Ukrainian readers Welsh author Sarah Waters (born in 1966), “Tipping the Velvet” (1998), “Affinity” (1999), “Fingersmith” (2002) with a characteristic historical revisionism depict the aristocracy prime in Victorian England. The writer herself defines her novels as “lesbo historical romps”. The choice of such problem was stipulated by the theme of the writer's scientific research, namely the study of the historical prose of the English sexual minorities in the Victorian Age.

Unlike the mentioned works in the two following novels, “The Night Watch” (2006) and “The Little Stranger” (2009), Waters abandoned the outlined theme and period; this also affected the change in

genre forms. Her novel the “The Little Stranger” combines elements of mystery, detective intrigue, mysticism, in particular poltergeist and ghost story features, as well as historical sketch of the postwar England in the late 1940s.

Among the genre definitions used by critics to this Waters’ novel we encounter “gothic story genre” [1], a “novel of suspense”, “supernatural thriller”, “haunted house novel” [3], “spooky historical novel” [10], “macabre story” [11], “Supernatural country house whodunit” [18], etc.

As Aphira Akbar points out, “she drew on the literary influences of Henry James and Willkie Collins to create a ghost story which only ever tip-toes around horror, never fully enacting it” as well as the detective secrets of Agatha Christie, multiplied by the “hysteria of upper classes” that lost their social and economic basis and pulled through “hyper-rational theories of psychopathology” [1]. However, none of the genre formats of the novel was fully complied with, in particular, as Akbar noticed; we get “a haunted house tale without a ghost, a country-home murder with no actual victim, <...> an open-ending in a genre that demands explanations” [1]. Besides, “Little Stranger” by Waters, following the traditions of the Gothic novel by Ann Radcliffe and Daphne du Maurier, was nominated for the Shirley Jackson Award, awarded for fiction works written in the genres of horror, dark fantasy and suspense, and aroused high interest and the lively polemics of a wide audience of readers. The author herself in an interview with *The Guardian* [18] admitted that no other her novel had inspired such a large range of reader reviews as this one.

The readers of the novel in numerous letters and comments offered their interpretations of the mysterious tragedy of the Ayreses family: apologists of the rational explication believed that the things to blame were the new epoch, class conflict, and failure of protagonists to live in a new way, that resulted in escape from reality through suicide and insanity; others tended to believe in the interference of paranormal, inherent in English mentality and culture [11].

In an effort to reach the diverse versions of readers-members of the literary club, John Mullan suggests that the uncertainty of the last pages makes Waters’ novel similar to a mirror. The readers who believe in supernatural will argue that no rational explanation is possible for the

evidence given, while skeptics tend to argue for unreliable narrators, multiple personality disorders, etc. [11]. The versatile and sometimes diametrically opposite reaction of the readers of Waters' novel, and the threefold interaction of the author-text-reader, that attracted the attention of scholars and literary critics, deserves a more detailed analysis.

Despite the explicit Gothic modality, the historical context makes it possible to implement the author's conceptual intentions. The action of the novel takes place in 1947 in the heart of England, in Warwickshire. A thorough, detailed description of the period allows Waters to create a depressing post-war atmosphere of decline, full of anxiety and distress, futile hopes and uncertainties in the future. The complex social, political and economic processes in the country wrecked by the war irreversibly change not only the life of the aristocracy, but also the life of all the society strata.

By creating a special temporal and spatial continuum, using the techniques of different genres (from mysticism to real historical sketch, social everyday life and psychological mechanisms), due to the linear structure with the open ending, Waters builds an original metamorphosed genre focused on the saturation of psychological influences.

The setting in the novel is the Hundreds Hall, once a magnificent family estate of the eighteenth century, which is collapsing in the face of lack of funds, servants and mischievous management. Its inhabitants are the impoverished family of the rural gentry, represented by aging Mrs. Ayres, who survived more than one loss, but still clinging to the lifestyle that passes away, her hopelessly unmarried daughter Caroline and her son Roderick crippled in the war. Rod, although he is only twenty, due to terrible memories and his physical disability (his face and hands were burned in the plane crash, the broken knee causes unbearable pain), he lost interest in life and is unable to keep the estate.

Unattractive and awkward Caroline is compelled to take care of her brother and mom, and work on a par with a servant. Their widowed mother tends to live by memories of the past magnificent life, when her first daughter Susan was still alive, her beloved baby, who died of diphtheria. It is hard for Mrs. Ayres to understand how different they are from the postwar aristocracy of the "nouveau riche". They have already sold all the valuable things and live on a poor income from a small dairy farm and by selling land. Besides, the mysterious awful things begin to

happen in the house, as if some unknown evil pays a score to the Ayreses.

Unclear sounds, looks from the darkness, moving objects, mysterious fire, strange spots and inscriptions appear on the walls and furniture; the old humble dog suddenly had given a child a nasty bite in the face. And there is no significant evidence that a ghost, a poltergeist, or one of the characters deliberately or unintentionally does these evil things.

The Gothic gloom of the old estate absorbs the reader, but the text itself resists: every preternatural event is opposed to a rational explanation, spurring readers to hesitate, thereby stimulating their activity in recognizing the problem and creating their own beliefs, judgments and interpretations.

In “The Little Stranger” Sarah Waters applies an inappropriate for her previous novels narrative strategy. The narration is performed by Dr Faraday, a stolid forty-year-old provincial GP, representative of the lower social stratum. Faraday's parents worked hard as servants to give their son education, but he does not feel happy: he is not married, doesn't have a home of his own and he is quite mediocre in the profession. The author explains her choice:

I was interested in class and I knew there would be a male narrator, very much in the ghost story mode. Dr Faraday was at first, going to be a much more middle class, transparent narrator, but I became interested in his more complicated relationship with the Ayres family, for whom his mother worked. One of the technical challenges was to make the reader see more than he sees [1].

Sarah Waters chooses a subjective narration type, when the homodiegetic narrator performs a dual function: both the narrator-observer and the character. Despite the numerous hints of the author for the fact that “Dr Faraday's bland narrative surface <...> there was a whole layer of sometimes turbulent activity going on just beneath it” [18] the vast majority of credulous readers perceived Faraday as “a dull, annoying and frustrating character” [10]. However, more informed audience recognized him as an unreliable narrator, divergently implicated by the author.

According to Faraday's narration, readers find out that he was called to the estate to examine a single maidservant Betty; but she just pretended to be ill. Being frightened the teen-ager did not want to work in that strange haunted house. The doctor wins her sympathy, promising not to reveal the girl's secret to her masters and trying to dispel superstitious fears in a rational way. Subsequently, Faraday's skepticism is gradually being questioned, although Dr Faraday makes considerable efforts to become not only a physician of the Ayreses, but also a close friend of the family, even one of them, marrying Caroline.

Sarah Waters admits that the novel's narrator Dr Faraday at first was planned to be a "rather transparent figure in the classic ghost-story style of M. R. James or Oliver Onions <...> Then I saw in it wonderful possibilities of unreliability, something I had never explored with a narrator before" [18]. As we learn from the novel, despite social inequality, at his first visit the Ayres invited Dr Faraday to stay for the afternoon tea. In the conversation, he recalled that he had already been there as a child. His mother worked as a nanny in the estate, and somehow took him to celebrate the Empire Day in 1919. Faraday even confessed to Caroline as then, impressed with grandeur and exquisite interior of the house, he perpetrated "an act of vandalism". He broke off and took with him some plaster acorn, as if initiating the decay. Faraday compares this act with the possession of the hair of a lovely girl: "I was like a man, I suppose, wanting a lock of hair from the head of a girl he had suddenly and blindingly become enamored of" [17, p. 3].

In this context the title of the novel "The Little Stranger" due to its the semantic meaning also seems to be transparent, because "stranger" can be perceived as an "outsider", "not a family member", a "visitor", and the connotation of the adjective "little" indicates the narrator's mediocrity, worthlessness. By the way, to the end of the novel Faraday remains a nameless character.

It is well known that the term "unreliable narrator" was coined by Wayne Clayton Booth in his seminal work "The Rhetoric of Fiction" (1961). Booth's entire approach to fiction narration analyses is determined by his conviction that "the novel comes into existence as something communicable" [2, p. 397]. The scholar's emphasis is mostly on a textual environment of communication and reception since the narration also affects the reader's engagement with the text. According to

Booth, an unreliable narrator makes the reader to draw conclusions about the characters or the narrative of what is not said. This narrative strategy is used by the author for implied communication with the reader [2, p. 304]. Unreliable narration can reflect a “profoundly confused, basically self-deceived and even wrong-headed or vicious narrator” [2, p. 340]. The ambiguity and confusion of the narrator generally leads to a confused and ambiguous reader [2, p. 374] trying to decode the unreliable, impersonal narrator.

In general the views of theorists and scholars dealing with narrative unreliability can be represented by two major narratological schools: rhetorical (Wayne Booth [2], Seymour Chatman [5; 6], Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan [16], James Phelan [15], Greta Olson [14]) and cognitive/ constructivist narratology (Tamar Yacobi [19], Ansgar Nünning [12; 13]). Booth’s successors, adhering to the rhetorical argument, consider the unreliability as the characteristic of the text laid in it by the implicit author and intended to be decoded by the implicit reader. Representatives of cognitive/ constructivist school, on the contrary, embrace a reader-oriented model; they focus on the process of interpretation and believe that unreliability comes into existence due to various readers’ responses. This approach, developed by T. Yacobi, involves five integration mechanisms or “logics of resolution” that could indicate textual discordance: the genetic (authorial slip-ups, typographical errors); the generic (the oddity compatible with the genre), the existential; the functional (the deviation compatible with the structural whole) and perspectival (a perceptible gap between author and narrator), which readers may come across as textual inconsistencies [19]. Selectively these mechanisms were also applied in decoding by Waters’ readers.

As for constructivist approach the peculiar effects of unreliable narration result from the conflict between the narrator’s report of the ‘facts’ on the level of the story and the interpretations and judgements provided by the narrator [12, p. 58]. Thus Nünning argues:

In addition to internal contradictions and to linguistic clues to subjectivity there are other textual signals of a narrator’s unreliability, such as conflicts between story and discourse or between the narrator’s representation of events and the explanations and interpretations of them that the narrator gives [12, p. 65].

The apologist of the rhetorical approach – Greta Olson suggests explicit differentiation between two subcategories of unreliable narration: “fallible” and “untrustworthy”, paying attention to “unspoken message behind the literal one.” While Dorrit Cohn argues for “factual” sort of unreliability, whereby the narrator is “mis- or dis-informed,” deviates from the “ideological” kind to such a degree that the latter deserves its own category: discordant. James Phelan, who also in the rhetorical way developed the Booth concept of unreliable narrator, proposed his own classification of six types of unreliability, which are divided into two broader categories: 1) misreporting, misreading (misinterpreting), misevaluating (misregarding); 2) underreporting, underreading (underinterpreting), underevaluating (underregarding) [15, p. 323]. The main difference between the categories is the difference between improper and insufficient. However, one of the types of unreliability is often related to the others: insufficient information may be given in the result of little awareness, or imperfect values can, correspondingly, be combined with an incorrect interpretation or evaluation [15, p. 323]. In this context Phelan points out the fact that narrative unreliability is a mediate narrative device that is observed in the narrations of Dr Faraday in Waters’ novel.

A lot of such things were decoded and detected by the readers. As John Mullan noticed,

one reader, focusing on the discovery by Caroline and her mother of letters scrawled on a wall in a childish hand, analysed the effect beautifully. The first time you read this section of the story, she argued, you are carried along by the horrible momentum of the characters’ “discoveries”. On rereading, the episode becomes unsettling because of “the way Faraday narrates it”. He is basing his account on what Caroline has told him, and yet he includes details – how Mrs Ayres moves her hands, what Caroline is wearing – that “I am certain Caroline would not have told him”. The reader found herself thinking, “He’s just making stuff up”. He is “projecting himself” into the house – describing in such detail things that he hasn’t seen. “This is really creepy” [11].

Thus, in Faraday’s narratives, the complementarities of misreporting with misinterpreting (treatment of Roderick and Mrs. Ayres; retelling from the words of others), underreporting (talks with

Betty) and misevaluating (“act of vandalism” and the dog accident) are traced. So, according to Phelan, the author must make the text obvious for two audiences and two purposes [15, p. 323]. In the case of Waters, the first audience is represented by versed readers who adhere to the author's conceptual frames, the second comprises the supporters of their own interpretations. Such an ambivalence of the reception response fully corresponds to the author's intentions:

The novel was to be set in the 1940s, and was to have as its background changes in the British class system. It had been inspired by the deep anxiety I'd seen at work in the fiction of conservative 40s writers such as Angela Thirkell and Josephine Tey – an anxiety about a changing social system and a newly confident working class that amounted, at times, to a kind of hysteria. In looking for a way to address the issue <...> it struck me that I could take the class tensions underpinning conservative post war paranoia and rewrite them as something actively paranormal [18].

Sarah Waters considers that in the historical context the poltergeist will serve better than just a ghost:

I've always been drawn to the post-Freudian interpretation of the poltergeist as an acting-out of psychic distress <...> In other words, while Hundreds Hall, my fictional setting for the novel, was definitely to be a haunted house, it was to be haunted not by the spirits of the dead, but by the unconscious aggressions and frustrations of the living. I wanted “The Little Stranger” to be a sort of supernatural country house whodunit [18].

Accordingly, some readers perceive the supernatural in the novel literally, while others give it a symbolic meaning, carrying out a receptive shift in favour of an unreliable narration as a literary device conceived by the author.

For Dr Faraday the Ayreses' house is the embodiment of his subconscious unrealized desires with a mixed flavour of humiliation and hope. All his attempts to get closer to them fail. Despite his social status as a doctor, for them he is still the son of a maidservant. Roderick angrily shouts at him: “Why the hell are you here? How did you manage to get such a footing in this house? You're not a part of this family! You're no one!” [17, p. 197]. Mrs. Ayres frankly says that under other

circumstances she would not consider him a good match for her daughter. By the way, it was Faraday who insisted to place Roderick, convinced that he should guard the evil that settled in the house, to the mental hospital, persuading others that he is guilty of the fire and dangerous to others. Then the “ghost” appeared to Mrs. Ayres who believed it was her dear dead daughter Susan “though not always affectionate” [17, p. 219–220]. Finally, when Caroline broke up the engagement with Faraday and wanted to sell the house and leave, she died falling down the stairs at night. As Betty said, she exclaimed “you!” recognizing someone before her death [17, p. 483]. Though Faraday assured that at this time he was sleeping in his car near the Ayres’ estate and dreaming as if he was going to the house and disappearing in the darkness:

I saw myself doing it, with all the hectic, unnatural clarity with which I’d been recalling the dash to the hospital a little while before. I saw myself cross the silvered landscape and pass like smoke through the Hundreds gate <...> for the drive was changed, was queer and wrong, was impossibly lengthy and tangled with, at the end of it, nothing but darkness [17, p. 473].

Barbara Braid, emphasizing the changed state of mind of the narrator, suggests that his Alter Ego, his Hyde, went to Hundreds Hall to punish his bride for refusal [5]. We find significant evidence in the ending of the novel. Hundreds Hall has never been sold and Faraday, who keeps his old key, continues to visit it from time to time. He hopes to see there “the little stranger” and to unravel the mystery of Caroline’s death. Sometimes he thinks he can see something. Feeling the presence of someone and overcoming fear, Faraday understands that what he sees is just someone’s distorted by astonishment face in the cracked window glass, and he is disappointed to realize that he is looking at his own mirrored appearance [17, p. 499].

Narrative unreliability in the novel serves as a kind of disguise for the mental aberrations of the homodiegetic narrator, so that the peculiarities of his narration cause doubts about his adequacy, freeing the reader from his influence and making it possible to create various interpretations of the story. Sam Jordison assumes:

Dr Faraday fails to realise is that this face, his own face, is actually the true little stranger he is looking for <...> he seems prone to blackouts, is desperate to get his hands on the house, has a motive rooted in class envy, is alibi-free at important times, and there are a number of references to his potential involvement in the closing pages [10].

It seems clear that Waters' narrative strategy corresponds to M. Fludernik's typology who among other types of unreliable narrators calls "obsessed by certain ideas" [8, p. 27]. Ron Charles also agrees that, worshipping the house and endeavouring to win the favour of its impoverished proprietors, Faraday sublimates his envy into the deep concern for their well-being that reflects his psychological state of obsession. Nevertheless, R. Charles admits that psychology is not able to explain everything that happens in this doomed house. Waters teases us with clues, each time pointing out another direction: psychological, paranormal, or social and economic [4]. Furthermore, the American critic also recognizes that different cultural contexts with different social norms will significantly affect the interpretation of unreliability in the novel. In particular, the receptive reaction to Waters' novel of British readers is significantly different from the perception of the Americans, for whom the class problems are less significant than for the British [10]. In particular, the statement is supported with Jordison's understanding of the little stranger as an expanded metaphor for the post-war destruction of the gentry under the pressure of the working class embodied by Dr Faraday and the like.

However the author herself keeps the intrigue:

I deliberately left the resolution open; that I wanted to do justice to the essential strangeness of the supernatural; that I am very happy for readers to make up their own minds. All this is true – sort of <...> when these clues do snag their reader, I experience a glow of writerly satisfaction and feel I pitched things just right. When they don't – well, *The Little Stranger* is about conflict and waste; I never wanted its effect to be tidy [18].

Consequently, narrative unreliability in the novel "The Little Stranger" by Sarah Waters, in particular misreporting and underinterpreting, misinterpreting, and misevaluating by the discordant narrator, as a literary device, directly affect the range of reception shift,

i.e. the corresponding scope between recognizing the original meaning realised by the implicit author and taking into account varied interpretations of the text by real readers. Hence, the correlation between Faraday's unreliable narrative, social and class identity, the cultural and historical context of the novel, the feedback of readers concerning supernatural phenomena, indicate in favour of reception shifts from the implicit reader to the text (communication), and from interpretive frames to the implicit author and reverse, that allows to apply a convergence of rhetorical and cognitive/ constructivist methods in the analyses of the novel. The dynamics of multiple genre characteristics of Waters' "spooky historical novel" in readers' reactualization is perceived by generic logics. Specific character of textual, thematic, ideological or epistemological discrepancies of the novel indicates the transition from exemplification to modulation in its genre identification.

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## **НАРАТИВНА НЕНАДІЙНІСТЬ ЯК ХУДОЖНІЙ ПРИЙОМ ТА РЕЦЕПТИВНИЙ ЗСУВ**

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**Анотація.** Основна мета статті – проаналізувати наративну ненадійність як художній прийом у рецептивній перспективі. Оскільки попередні дослідження зосереджувалися головню на текстових невідповідностях, висловлювалися думки щодо стратегій кодування

імпліцитним автором або ж пропонувалася читацько-орієнтована модель; дане дослідження розглядає концепцію ненадійної нарації як зближення риторичної та когнітивно-конструктивістської моделей в аналізі художнього твору, у тому числі і стосовно ідентифікації його жанру. Об'єктом аналізу є роман Сари Уотерс „Маленький незнайомец”, зокрема його метаморфізований жанр. Уотерс обирає суб'єктивний тип оповіді, коли гомодієгетичний оповідач виконує подвійну функцію: оповідача-спостерігача і персонажа. Ненадійність оповіді проявляється як повідомлення недостовірної або неповної інформації, неправильна інтерпретація та помилкова оцінка, і служить своєрідним маскуванням ментальних аберацій гомодієгетичного оповідача. Особливості його оповіді викликають сумніви щодо достовірності, тим самим звільняючи читача від впливу наратора і даючи можливість створювати власні тлумачення. Отже, ненадійність оповіді в романі безпосередньо впливає як на ідентифікацію жанру, так і на діапазон рецептивного зсуву від імпліцитного читача до тексту, а також від інтерпретованих фреймів до імпліцитного автора і навпаки, що дозволяє застосувати конвергенцію риторичного і когнітивно-конструктивістського методів при аналізі даного твору.

**Ключові слова:** Сара Уотерс, нарративна ненадійність, гомодієгетичний оповідач, невідповідність, рецепція, метаморфізований жанр.

## НАРРАТИВНАЯ НЕДОСТОВЕРНОСТЬ КАК ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННЫЙ ПРИЕМ И РЕЦЕПТИВНЫЙ СДВИГ

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**Аннотация.** Основная цель статьи – проанализировать нарративную ненадежность как художественный прием в рецептивной перспективе. Поскольку предыдущие исследования сосредотачивались главным образом на текстовых несоответствиях, высказывались теории относительно стратегий кодирования имплицитным автором или предлагалась читательско-ориентированная модель; данное исследование рассматривает концепцию ненадежной наррации как сближение риторической и когнитивно-конструктивистской моделей в анализе художественного произведения, в том числе и в отношении идентификации его жанра. Объектом анализа является роман Сары Уотерс „Маленький незнаомец”, в частности его жанровая

природа. Уотерс вибирає суб'єктивний тип повествовання, когда гомодиегетичний розказчик виконує подвійну функцію: розказчика-наблюдателя і персонажа. Ненадійність повествовання проявляється як повідомлення недостовірної або неповної інформації, неправильна інтерпретація і помилкова оцінка і служить своєобразною маскуванням ментальних аберацій гомодиегетичного розказчика. Особливості його нарратива викликають сумніви в достовірності, тем самим звільняючи читача від впливу розказчика і даючи можливість створювати власні трактування. Таким чином, ненадійність повествовання в романі безпосередньо впливає як на ідентифікацію жанру, так і на діапазон рецептивного зсуву від імпліцитного читача до тексту і від інтерпретуваних фреймів до імпліцитного автора і навпаки, що дозволяє застосувати конвергенцію риторического і когнітивно-конструктивістського методів в аналізі даного твору.

**Ключевые слова:** Сара Уотерс, нарративная ненадійність, гомодиегетический розказчик, несоответствие, рецепция, метаморфизованный жанр.

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